

Greetings once again from MI.

Today I want to discuss something related to pastoral counseling, which is something many of us engage in either overtly or implicitly in the course of ministry. The focus today is on pastoral counseling in post-modern and post-Christian societies which are dramatically impacted by the forces and ethos of radical secular humanism. We may not all minister in this environment, but we do need an awareness of how biblical pastoral counseling may clash with the dominant or underlying philosophical world which those we come into contact with inhabit. My focus today will be on the impact of existential psychotherapy.

## **Introduction**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed increased attempts to understand the mental processes and health of man, and saw the rapid development of a range of theories and concomitant techniques for use by practitioners in psychological interventions. From this intellectual milieu, three broad psychological schools can be identified: the psychodynamic school; the humanistic-existential school; and the cognitive-behavioral school.

Within the humanistic-existential school, existential psychotherapy (EP) was championed by a number of key thinkers including Frankl, May, Yalom and Bugental, a development that paralleled the development of existential thought in the French school of secular existentialism - Sartre (1905-1980) and Camus (1913-1960), the German school – Heidegger (1889-1976), and the Swiss school – Jaspers (1883-1969).

Existential thinkers often differ greatly in their political, religious, ethical and sociological affiliations. Such persons include Christian thinkers such as Kierkegaard (Protestant and theist), Dostoevsky (Eastern Orthodox), Tillich (Protestant), and Hegel (Protestant and German idealist), and non-Christian thinkers such as Sartre (atheist), Kafka (absurdist), Heidegger (theist and phenomenologist), Nietzsche (individualist, anti-Christian), De Beauvoir (feminist, lover of Sartre), Camus (absurdist and atheist) and Jaspers (agnostic).

In existential thought, freewill is a burden, as it forces the individual to choose, and then to face the consequences of their decisions. Existential guilt is then faced when an individual realizes that due to their choices they have not been able to fully actualize or realize their potential. In order to reduce this stress, existentialists believe that a highly ordered society is necessary, as this reduces the necessity for individuals to make stress-inducing decisions. Therefore (to follow the logic through), the more structured a society is, the more functional and stress-free it will be for the citizens who have been relieved of the burden of decision-making. Based on this understanding, it is not hard to see why existentialists like Heidegger and Sartre supported totalitarian regimes (Nazi Germany and the USSR respectively).

There is somewhat of a philosophical paradox within existentialist thought. All philosophical schools have foundational assumptions or ‘truths’, and if a school has a foundational assumption that ‘there are no universal truths’, this, paradoxically, is itself a form of universal truth, and denies the original assumption. Existentialism does therefore assume some underlying ‘truths’, and requires these in order to be able to develop its philosophical out-workings consistently and methodologically.

Today, EP is a recognized theoretical approach to counseling and psychotherapy, but given its secular and humanistic roots, how compatible is it to the practice of pastoral counseling? I will approach this question in the following way: firstly, I will provide a brief outline of EP; secondly, I will provide a critique of the assumptions underlying EP; thirdly, I will provide a brief critique of the practice of EP; before turning to my conclusions. We turn first to a brief outline of existential psychotherapy.

EP is based on existential philosophy, which although notoriously difficult to define, can be said to include the following key beliefs:

- Mankind, a sentient being, has free will.
- Life is a series of choices.
- Each choice in life that is made, or not made, can create internal stress.
- Few decisions can be made without negative consequences.
- Some things are absurd, irrational and without explanation.
- If a person makes a decision, he must follow through on his decision in order to be authentic.

Although there are a widely divergent religious, political and sociological beliefs held by existentialists, there seem to be common factors: despair; the meaninglessness of the human condition; the 'burden' of freewill; the necessity to remove social restrictions on one's freedom to choose and act; the absolute freedom of the individual to choose; and in existential ethics, there is no ultimate right or wrong, decisions within the different existential scopes being viewed as better or worse depending purely on the extent to which they impinge on the freedom of others to choose and subsequently act.

Within EP thought, anxiety is viewed as being 'normal' when it is 'proportionate to the objective threat in the situation being confronted', when it 'does not involve repression', and when it 'can be used creatively to identify and confront the conditions bringing it about'. Neurotic anxiety does not exhibit these key characteristics, being disproportionate, repressive, and leading to denial rather than recognition. Guilt is defined along three dimensions: normal guilt is a 'call to conscience and sensitizes people to the ethical aspects of their behavior', neurotic guilt 'derives from imagine transgressions against others, parental injunctions, and societal conventions', and existential guilt is rooted in self-awareness, and occurs when 'I can see myself as the one who can choose or fail to choose'. Existential guilt is therefore ineluctably linked with the concept of personal freedom of choice, and whether one chooses to act or not.

Modern EP may best be described as a philosophy of therapy rather than as a collection of discrete methodological interventions. EP's therapeutic goal is to help the client experience their existence as real through a dynamic approach that enables the client to focus on the universal existential concerns of death, meaninglessness, isolation and freedom.

EP asserts that both anxiety and guilt may be normal or neurotic, but guilt may also be existential when one experiences an inner conflict when one transgresses, or denies through one's choices, one's potential. As modern western society is changing rapidly, so traditional family expectations, and religious and social value systems are losing their ability to convey meaning to modern man. Modern man is therefore increasingly forced to confront and deal with the key existential concerns in order to experience his life as being real, and with meaning, or must make the ultimate existential decision, and commit suicide.

EP therapy is conducted within the context of a relationship that offers presence, authenticity and commitment. Key defense measures for the ultimate existential concerns are as follows:

- Against death: irrational beliefs in somehow being 'special' or 'immortal'; compulsive heroism; narcissism; drives for power or control; and belief in an 'ultimate rescuer'.
- Against freedom: compulsive behavior; denying responsibility by playing the role of passive victim; avoidance of autonomous behavior; and pathology in the processes of wishing, willing and deciding.
- Against isolation: seeking affirmation from others; fusion with a group or individual; and compulsive sexual behavior.

- Against meaninglessness: crusadism, nihilism, and the compulsive seeking after power, status, wealth, sex, control or pleasure.

Although EP is primarily a philosophy of treatment rather than a collection of discrete methodological techniques, and some therapists utilize an eclectic range of techniques from other schools, the following EP techniques may be utilized in EP counseling to enable clients to confront the existential concerns:

- For death: giving permission to discuss death; identifying defense mechanisms; interpretation of dreams; increasing death awareness; desensitizing clients to death; and identifying reminders of mortality.
- For freedom: identifying defense mechanisms and methods of avoiding responsibility; confronting realistic limitations, e.g. cancer; confronting existential guilt; freeing up wishing; and facilitating deciding (addressing procrastination).
- For isolation: confronting isolation; identifying defense mechanisms; identifying interpersonal pathology; and using the client – therapist relationship to illuminate pathology.
- For meaninglessness: redefining the problem, i.e. life has no ultimate meaning, so there is no point in searching for a meaning to life; identifying defense mechanisms; and assisting engagement in life.

During EP therapy, the client explores the source and authority of his value system, gains new insights, and thereby restructures his beliefs and value system in a manner consistent with his own self and his confrontation with existential concerns. Clients have a clearer idea of the kind of life they believe worthy to live, and of their internal value system processes.

Once the client has confronted these ultimate existential concerns, he is (theoretically) empowered to live a life that is real and authentic, and that focuses on his power to choose and subsequently act, thereby finding a personal meaning to life obliquely (in existential thought one finds meaning through constantly engaging in life by choosing to act and then acting, thereby ultimately fulfilling one's potential of being and reducing one's existential guilt, rather than by searching directly for meaning in life per se in a meaningless, indifferent and random universe).

### **A critique of the assumptions underlying existential psychotherapy.**

Francis Schaeffer in 'The God who is there' provides an incisive analysis of the movements in modern philosophy (to religious and secular existentialism), art, music, mass culture and neo-orthodox theology with Barth as its main proponent, all as a result of the adoption of the Hegelian dialectical thinking model in favour of the previous antithetical reasoning basis for philosophy, religious faith and logic. Hegel was the thinker who developed the dialectical mode of thinking, and Kierkegaard's theology and philosophical writings were instrumental in providing the leap (indeed, Kierkegaard's thought included within itself the concept of an irrational leap of faith when the rational and logical had failed to deliver a synthesis, a circle of rational thought within which life, the meaning of life and the ultimate existential questions could be answered) from Hegelian thought to modern philosophy, including religious (e.g. Tillich) and secular (e.g. Sartre, Camus, Jaspers) existentialism.

From a pastoral counseling perspective, EP's underlying assumptions have the following strengths:

- EP is based on Hegelian dialectical thinking, an approach that is fundamental to virtually all the socio-economic approaches used throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. EP's dialectical basis is consistent with the philosophies of modern art, music, literature, mass culture and neo-orthodox theology, and

it is therefore critically important to understand these philosophical assumptions if one, as a pastoral counselor, is to understand the thought processes and outlook of modern man.

- EP's existential foundations emphasize an almost spiritual dimension of the moment of 'self-actualization', the quest for which led to the systematic use of LSD and other mind-altering substances, and to increased interest in New Age philosophies. Understanding the search for an undefinable and un-communicable 'final' or 'self-actualizing' experience amongst modern man is an important precondition to counseling modern man, particularly youth from the modern youth culture.

However, EP's assumptions have the following weaknesses for pastoral counselors:

- EP dialectical thought and ethical relativism is diametrically opposed to the biblical worldview of thesis & antithesis, good & evil.
- EP's relativistic understanding of the nature of man entirely rejects the concepts of the fall, sin, and the need for a personal redeemer.
- EP assumes that life per se is meaningless, rather we have to continually re-create meaning for ourselves through ongoing transcendence. However, in biblical thought man is intrinsically meaningful regardless of his daily activities or self-image, and inhabits an ordered, meaningful and rational universe.
- EP's humanistic assumptions reject the Biblical concept of original sin and man's fallen nature. Guilt is therefore seen primarily in existential terms, a failing to live up to one's potential through one's 'ineffective' choices, whereas the Bible teaches from Genesis 2-3 onwards the need for, and promise of, a redeemer to save mankind from sin.
- EP's existential self is built on a fundamental flaw: a 'self' built on the concept of a criterion-less choice is impossible. A self-actualizing choice based on no criterion is intrinsically not a choice (the EP world is random, without logic or rationality, and absurd, denying the possibility for rational choice on defined criteria).
- EP's understanding does not allow for how the 'self' is conditioned by biological or social factors, making the quest for the authentic 'self' almost meaningless.
- EP's understanding of death, human isolation, and freedom is diametrically at odds with the biblical understanding. When conducting pastoral counseling, the counselor must be aware that modern man may have (subconsciously) imbibed the EP *weltangshaung*, and that counseling may need to address these fundamental issues rather than the presenting issue.

It is clear that whilst EP's underlying assumptions are diametrically opposed to a biblical cosmology, ontology and understanding of man, a working knowledge of EP's philosophy is important for pastoral counselors when attempting to understand the underlying causes of presenting problems.

### **A critique of the practice of existential psychotherapy.**

From a pastoral counseling perspective, EP's practice has the following strengths:

- Working through EP's existential concerns can be very useful for people who are at crossroads in their lives, e.g. following the death of a close relative, who are feeling alienated from society, or who are struggling with developmental crises, e.g. adolescence, leaving home, mid-life crisis etc.
- EP focuses the counselor's perspective on what it is to be human, rather than utilizing a proscribed and mechanical methodology to identify a particular pathology within a person.
- EP's methodology encourages the client to focus on current feeling rather than on past events, and through confronting the existential concerns, has a forward looking focus.

- EP's methodology discourages the client from playing the role of victim or viewing themselves as being helpless, rather encouraging the client to take personal responsibility for his life through on-going 'effective' decision-making.
- EP's practice is useful for people from, and immersed in, western industrialized economies, who live in depersonalized cities, are alienated from agricultural rhythms, have seen the decline of organized religion and traditional religious faiths, and who whilst having the means to live, have lost a meaning for life, leading to an 'existential vacuum' or feeling of emptiness.

However, EP's practice for pastoral counselors may have the following weaknesses:

- EP does not have well-defined methodologies, being viewed rather as a contact between two beings, and this lack of methodological definition and clarity may cause practical difficulties for pastoral counselors when facing those clients with ultimate existential concerns.
- The EP therapeutic process can cause great anxiety and loneliness for the client, as traditional (and 'imposed') values are discarded and none are put in their place. It would be very difficult for a Christian pastoral counselor to leave a client floundering in a sea of relativism and uncertainty, believing that the client must determine his own values from within himself rather than helping to lead the client to Christ.
- EP may not be effective for people from non-western industrialized countries, or for ethnic and cultural minorities within western industrialized countries.
- EP terminology may be viewed as mystical or almost religious, and the lack of precision in defining terms may create confusion and uncertainty over how exactly to proceed and evaluate progress for pastoral counselors.

EP may therefore be useful in certain circumstances, encourages a proactive approach and responsibility-taking behavior for clients, and discourages the playing of victim and denial of responsibility. However, its use may not be consistently relevant within a multi-cultural and multi-faith environment, it does not have well defined methodologies or concepts, it may leave a client feeling empty and without any guiding values in life, and due to its semi-mystical language, it does not allow the pastoral counselor to easily evaluate progress or know how to proceed on a practical basis with a client.

## **Conclusion.**

EP developed within the humanistic-existential school of psychology as an outworking of the intellectual milieu of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, drawing particularly on Hegelian dialectical thought, and existentialism, both religious and secular.

It is essential for a pastoral counselor within a biblical SDA Christian tradition to understand both EP and its Hegelian dialectic and humanistic philosophy, as modern western man operates overwhelmingly within this philosophical paradigm. Within a western industrialized culture, a client's primary (as opposed to presenting) problem may be the despair engendered by such a paradigm, and whilst recognizing that this paradigm is antithetically opposed to biblical Christianity, the pastoral counselor should understand the philosophical dilemmas a client may be struggling with. It is within this situation that pastoral counselors may utilize their understandings of EP and its methodologies primarily to initiate a dialogue and build mutual understanding and trust with the client.

However, although the judicious use of EP concepts and methodologies may have practical benefits for certain groups of people, EP assumes that each individual must find their own values and meaning for life within themselves and not from any external source or being. SDA Christian pastoral counselors may find it almost impossible to reconcile this humanistic approach and methodology to the Bible's revelation of

God, the nature of man, and God's purpose for humanity, and given EP's philosophical and practical limitations outlined above, should therefore be very careful in their use of EP interventions, using it primarily as a rapport-building and diagnostic tool rather than to identify God-honoring and God-trusting solutions with their clients.

Wherever we minister, let us strive to ensure that Jesus is lifted high in the minds of those we minister to, and may He then draw all peoples to Himself!

Have a blessed Sabbath!

Conrad.